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Prayer: “With Groanings Too Deep for Words”

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Text: Romans 8:26

This morning in our Scripture text, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray. Does that seem strange to you?

Didn't we read back in chapter 5 that the disciples were fasting and praying?
Why then, are they asking Jesus to teach them to pray?

These aren't children—they are grown men,
and as Jewish men—they've grown up in
a tradition that prays.

Grown ups know how to pray.
Why even little children
know how to pray.
Don't they?

Oh, I know they took prayer out of the schools,
but they can't take the prayer out of the kids.
Whether it's legal or not, they pray.

They pray some of the same prayers we used to pray.
“Remember the night before the big math test,
you'd pray that the school would burn down.
Or the day the teacher was going to visit your mom
and dad—

you'd pray she'd get lost
on the way to your house.”¹
Oh, yeah—the children
know how to pray.

Why don't the disciples know how to pray?
 It was so much easier for them—just a year ago—
 it was just them, then.

An itinerant preacher and a handful of disciples,
 wandering the hills of Judea. It was nice then.
 But now... the crowds have become
 unbelievable.

They follow him everywhere.
 Now, they don't just come after them, somehow they know
 where they will be.

Long before they arrive anywhere,
 the crowds have gathered—and they wait.
 They were putting all their hope in him.
 Made the disciples nervous.

Herod was getting nervous too—he heard about the crowds.
 The Pharisees were getting nervous—
 try as they would,
 he wouldn't dance to their music.

Everybody's getting nervous—the whole thing was just
 getting out of hand.

They are perhaps, for the first time, realizing just how big
 this whole thing is—that there isn't a natural event,
 a sickness, a demon—that is not within his control.

It seems that in the great events of our life—
 in moments when we stand face to face
 with the awesomeness of it all—
 it's then, that we don't know how to pray.

Strange isn't it? You'd think that it would be in the face
 of awe and wonder that we would find it easiest to express
 what is so deep within us.

In the wonderful poem about Sir Lancelot and the Knights
 of the Round Table, Arthur is dying
 and this is the question he asks...

The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
 And God fulfills himself in many ways,

“Lord, teach me to pray.”

Who really knows how to pray?

When we stand naked before God—in the experiences of life that take us to our knees—who knows how to pray?

I used to think it was prayer that takes us into the presence of God—but now I think that sometimes

it's the presence of God
that takes us to prayer.

I mean real prayer—gut stuff, that there just aren't any words for.

Oh, we will pray some wonderful prayers together,
You and I.

“Rev., do you have a copy of the prayer you gave at the turkey dinner?”

“That was a lovely prayer—
my sister would like a copy.”

“Rev., could I get a copy of that prayer
you gave at the funeral,
oh, the words were so appropriate—
I'd like a copy.”

But in truth—

when we face life—face to face,
with all its mystery,
None of us knows how to pray.
There are no words.

Our problem you see, is the same as the disciples.

When we stand in the presence of God
there are no words.

And yet that's the place we want to be,

it's what we long the deepest for
more than any other place
we want to be—in the presence of God.

Most of you know that the United Church down the street is looking for a new minister. Fred Craddock says if you want to see a church start fighting,

just quietly ask...

“So, what are you looking for in a NEW minister?”

“We need an elderly minister, an experienced minister,
one who’s been around—knows what to do.”

“Oh no we don’t!

We had an old experienced minister—
remember—used to sleep through the liturgy.

Had his head, down, right like that.

We don’t need an old experienced minister!

What we need is a young minister!

Someone who can relate to the teens.

There aren’t any young people in the church—
they’re in our future!

We need someone who can bring in the youth.”

“No we don’t, we had a young minister—
don’t you remember.

He went off on that hay ride and never came back!

No, we don’t need a young minister.

What we need is someone who can teach Scripture.

We’re getting away from the Bible.

What we need is someone who can get us
back to the Bible.”

“No we don’t. We had one of them—

she knew so much about the Bible, within a year
we were all so confused that none of us knew
what we believed anymore.

No! What we need is a minister who will call in the homes!

What ever happened to ministers
who call in the homes?

Ministers used to call in the homes.”

“No we don’t.

I don’t want no minister calling on me
in my home! When I get home from work—
I want to get comfortable.

You know what I mean—

I don’t want no Reverend calling on me

when I'm comfortable."

On Tuesday night at the joint meeting of the boards and sessions—for the first time I heard from you what you want from a minister. I heard you verbally express what you have called me to. The words were, "Mary, we need you to be our spiritual advisor." Those were the words. But the prayer was, "We need a minister who will take us into the presence of God."

"Mary, take us into
the presence of God."

The words are different but the prayer is the same for the disciples as it is for us; the yearning of the heart is the same. Only difference is they had the greatest teacher that ever lived, and you got a blond!

But the longing is the same—
we long to experience the
presence of God.

That's what we're doing here this morning, we are entering God's presence.

Why couldn't they pray? Perhaps, because of the awe and wonder and mystery of it all.

But these disciples had the God/man with them!
They had been with Jesus for two years now—
two long years.

This is the first time Scripture tells us they asked him to teach them to pray.

Why now?

Why has it taken them two years to notice that Jesus knows how to pray, not only does he know HOW but prayer was important to him.

According to Luke's Gospel prayer was an incredibly important part of all that Jesus did

- at his Baptism
- before choosing the twelve
- at his transfiguration

In Luke, Jesus is repeatedly at prayer.

Why don't the disciples know how to pray?

Maybe it was because everything
 seemed to be changing,
 and maybe, just maybe, they're beginning
 to realize what they are going
 to have to face.

This event takes place in the winter;
 in the spring Jesus will be crucified.
 He's been telling them since last spring
 that he is going to have to suffer and die.
 They don't want to hear it.

Scripture says that they fell on his neck and said,
 "Oh no, Lord, not this—
 don't let this happen; we can't take this."
 That's a funny thing about dying isn't it?
 We don't like to hear someone talk about
 their own dying,
 especially someone we love.

Talking about it places the burden of it on the ones
 who will be left behind; the disciples are going
 to be left behind.

My mom is comfortable talking about her dying.
 She says she wants big white cars, lots of colorful
 flowers, and lots and lots of singing—great
 rejoicing. No black on the day she meets her Lord.
 And I say—

 "Yeah, well, that's all right for you to say—
 'cause you're not going to be there!"
 She can talk about it—
 but I don't want to hear it.

I can talk about my dying—
 but my son David—
 he doesn't want to hear it.

When my brother was in the Wellesley hospital,
 we knew he was dying.
 I would walk there every day, for six weeks.
 And every day as I walked I would think of all
 the things I wanted to discuss with him

while we had time,
 things that needed to be said,
 things that needed to be decided.

I never said them—I couldn't do it.
 The night before he died—

he was in a coma—I held his hand,
 watched his chest go up and down.

There was no sign of life in his face.

And there were no words—
 no words to talk of death.

I had no words with which to pray.
 "Lord, teach me to pray."

Is that what the disciples are saying?

In the face of what's coming,
 in the face of death—there are no words.
 They don't know how to pray.

In the Hebrew Scripture it was the Shekinah—
 the tabernacle—that was God's presence
 with Israel.

Then, in the Gospels, Jesus became the Shekem;
 He dwelt among us,
 took on our flesh, cried our tears,
 hoped our hopes, knew our pain,
 and died our death.

Jesus' life,
 His birth, and his baptism,
 His ministry, and miracles,
 His teaching, his transfiguration,
 His passion, and his resurrection—
 they beheld the glory of
 the Divine Presence,
 they were the Shekem.

But the Shekem—the presence made flesh—is going
 to leave them, they want, like us, to know how to
 enter the SHEKEM again—how to be in the presence
 of God—"Lord, teach us to pray."

Jesus answers the disciples,

“If you pray—you will be given the Holy Spirit.”
Why this?

Paul says that the Holy Spirit,
is the ONE who knows the MIND
and the WILL of God.
The Holy Spirit speaks on our behalf.
Now, this is the key to the whole thing, you see.
When the end comes,
and we stand before our God—face to face with God,
it will not be the words
that we have offered up...
it will not be what we have prayed...
it will be that WE were prayed FOR.

By the Holy Spirit,
no matter what words we use—
as simple as “Teach us to pray.”

The Spirit of God knows our deepest pain,
our hidden hurts,
the sighs that are too deep for words.
And these, the Spirit takes before the throne of God,
on our behalf.

What an awesome thought—
that we are being prayed for by someone
who knows the mind and the will of God.

This is the blessing—
that whether we have an eloquent prayer,
or a long list of needs,
whether it's a “popcorn” prayer,
“O, God, help”,
or whether we stand in the
awesomeness of life
with no words,
the Holy Spirit speaks on our behalf.

Prayer, you see, is not about words,
it's about longing—a longing of the heart—
to commune with the heart of God,

to be in the presence of God.

By His Grace—the Holy Spirit presents us—to our God.

Notes

- ¹ James S. Hewett (ed.), *Illustrations Unlimited* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1988) 62.
- ² Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "The Passing of Arthur", in *Idylls of the King* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1983) 299, lines 408-421.